

# MUSEUM NEWS

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COVER OF WRITING BOX

TOKUGAWA PERIOD, 18TH CENTURY

High gold relief and brown lacquer in imitation of leather. Mother-of-pearl and metal inlays. Cherry tree and window of scholar's study, in which are shown writing and incense equipment

THE TOLEDO MUSEUM OF ART  
FOUNDED BY EDWARD DRUMMOND LIBBEY



## THE FEE COLLECTION OF JAPANESE LACQUER

THE ART OF LACQUER as practiced in Japan holds high rank among the most perfect examples of man's skill and ingenuity. Originally brought from China via Korea, it was well established by the eighth century when edicts were issued governing the cultivation of lacquer trees and establishing a superintendent bureaucracy. Few examples of the Nara, Fujiwara and Kamakura periods exist in foreign collections as it was not until the sixteenth century when Japan arose as a unified nation from warring factions that patronage became general enough to encourage widespread development of the art. The pieces in the extensive collection given by H. A. Fee of Adrian, Michigan during the last four years date from this period to the nineteenth century when the Meiji restoration of imperial power (1868) signified the abandonment of Japan's long, self-imposed isolation and the introduction of Western industrial concepts. In this new atmosphere, the days were numbered for an art whose quality depends on exquisite, time-consuming craftsmanship.

Lacquer is the sap of the *Rhus vernicifera*, a species of sumac tree, and is extracted in a clear state from the trunk and branches. After the evaporation of excess water, purification and ageing it is ready for application to the thin, precisely fitted wooden base which will form the core of the object. This has been smoothed, primed and given a preliminary foundation of several types of lacquer mixtures plus a fabric covering. Eight to ten layers of pure lacquer are now laid on, the surface being ground and polished between each. Upon exposure to air lacquer turns black, but it possesses the peculiar chemical quality of 'drying' or hardening only in the presence of moisture. An enclosed



INSIDE OF BOX COVER  
TOKUGAWA PERIOD, 18TH CENT.  
Low gold relief, kirikane  
and togidashi

box is used for the purpose, at least twelve hours being required to harden each coat. In all, some twenty-two steps take place to produce a strong, impermeable foundation before any decorative materials are laid on. These might be metals such as gold, silver, copper, lead or pewter, or they might imitate metal, iron rust, leather or even bark. Mother of pearl, pottery and coral were also widely used, texture, form and color being considered in the choice of materials.

The larger part of Mr. Fee's gift of 293 pieces consists of the gold lacquer ware raised to the height of technical virtuosity and elaboration during the Tokugawa period (1603-1868). Three principal modes of decoration can be singled out from the many

used: decoration in low gold relief called *hira-makiye* or 'flat sown picture'; decoration in high gold relief called *taka-makiye* or 'raised sown picture'; and decoration by building up the design in differently colored layers and then rubbing down to an uniform smoothness. With this process, called *togidashi*, or 'polished out', pictorial designs of the most subtle delicacy were achieved. Small pieces of rectangular sheet gold might be incorporated in a sort of mosaic (*kirikane*) or gold dust be worked to produce a flat, dull finish (*fundame*). A type much used for the interiors of boxes and *inro*, the small, sectioned, highly ornamented cases carried by men at the waist, was the noted *nashiji* or 'pear skin lacquer' in which gold filings are sunk at varying depths to show through transparent, brownish layers.

Plain surfaces of the valued mirror black or gold *fundame* either used alone or in contrast with highly wrought ornament serve a similar aesthetic purpose as the blank paper of a scroll painting.

Indeed, noted painters were responsible for highly original lacquer designs. Among these was Korin (1661-1716), whose refreshingly free composition was independent of the artists who were largely dependent on the classical Chinese and Japanese tradition. His ideas were furthered by Ritsuo (1663-1747), noted for his unorthodox pottery inlays, and Zeshin (1807-1891). Today their work and that under their influence appears to Western eyes as the most enduringly 'Japanese'.

It may fairly be said that no other material—not even excepting porcelain—is used in so many ways domestically speaking. Its remarkably smooth surface cleans easily and resistance to water, heat, acids, alcohol, and abrasion makes lacquer universally desirable for eating equipment and furniture. Its versatility as a decorative medium makes it a substance to be valued for the enrichment of the writing and document boxes, incense and picnic sets, *inro*, combs and cups to be found in Mr. Fee's rich collection which represents an art characteristically Japanese not only in its forms and materials, but also in the perfection and craftsmanship of its execution.



INRO AND NETSUKE  
TOKUGAWA PERIOD, 18TH CENT.  
Painting in Kano style of Kanban  
and Jittoku  
Gold fundame



ADMISSION FREE AT ALL TIMES

OTHER DAYS, 9 A.M. - 5 P.M.

HOLIDAYS, 1 - 5 P.M.

HOURS: SUNDAYS, MONDAYS, AND

TOLEDO 2, OHIO

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### 35TH ANNUAL TOLEDO AREA ARTISTS EXHIBITION

MORE THAN four hundred items by one hundred and twenty-four artists of Toledo and vicinity comprise the largest regional exhibition to be held here in recent years. Included are paintings, prints, ceramics, weaving, sculpture, jewelry and enamels chosen by an out-of-town jury from approximately 1400 entries. The Jury, consisting of Robert Brackman, noted American artist, Maija Grotell, Director of the Ceramics Department at Cranbrook Academy, and Perry T. Rathbone, Director of the City Art Museum, St. Louis, stated: "The Jury believes it has selected a strong exhibition of which the area should be proud. Of the classes of work submitted, the highest percentage of excellence was among ceramics. This is unusual as compared with other regional shows. . . It was not difficult to select works of genuine excellence in virtually every field for awards and purchases."

The Exhibition opens on Sunday, May 3, and will continue through May 31. Awards will be announced at an invitational preview on Saturday evening, May 2.